



Early Journal Content on JSTOR, Free to Anyone in the World

This article is one of nearly 500,000 scholarly works digitized and made freely available to everyone in the world by JSTOR.

Known as the Early Journal Content, this set of works include research articles, news, letters, and other writings published in more than 200 of the oldest leading academic journals. The works date from the mid-seventeenth to the early twentieth centuries.

We encourage people to read and share the Early Journal Content openly and to tell others that this resource exists. People may post this content online or redistribute in any way for non-commercial purposes.

Read more about Early Journal Content at <http://about.jstor.org/participate-jstor/individuals/early-journal-content>.

JSTOR is a digital library of academic journals, books, and primary source objects. JSTOR helps people discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content through a powerful research and teaching platform, and preserves this content for future generations. JSTOR is part of ITHAKA, a not-for-profit organization that also includes Ithaka S+R and Portico. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

WHAT SHALL WE DO WITH FRESHMAN THEMES?¹

ALLAN H. GILBERT
Trinity College, Durham, N.C.

The correction of papers is supposed to be the burden of the English teacher's life. I have even heard of a college where teachers of English, unlike those in other departments, are not paid for reading entrance papers, for the reason that it is their business to read papers. But when the teacher of English bewails his lot, and compares it with that of instructors who are not obliged to require much written work, he can console himself by thinking that, if he handles his papers properly, he does more for his pupils than do the others. Every student needs an opportunity to raise his own voice on the things he has been taught. Even the writing of a summary calls on him to analyze material, and decide what is important; and writing which calls into action higher powers is still more valuable. In truth, the best teachers of other subjects than English require their students to write papers; they do not abandon to the department of English a valuable instrument of education, and they are commonly wise in their use of it; at least they do not defeat their own ends by excessive zeal in requiring an undue number of finished papers.

But after the teacher of English has his papers, what is he to do with them? Above all, he should not be too conscientious in correcting them, but should keep in mind the words of the Preacher: "Be not righteous over much, . . . why shouldest thou destroy thyself?" and may add, destroy thy pupils with thee. We have all seen manuscripts which, after passing through the hands of an overly righteous teacher, reminded us of the book of magic described to Vivien by Tennyson's Merlin:

Every page having an ample marge,
And every marge enclosing in the midst
A square of text that looks a little blot, . . .

¹ Though this article is written from the college classroom most of it is equally applicable to high-school teaching.

And every margin scribbled, crost, and cramm'd
With comment, densest condensation, hard
To mind and eye.

When one looks at a sheet blushing rosy red from the teacher's hands, he may wonder what fraction of the time devoted to the theme by the commentator was spent on it by the original writer. How often does the teacher labor twenty minutes on what the student composed in ten, perhaps during the preceding class-period, while he seemed to be taking full notes of a lecture. On such papers something short and sharp is the only proper comment.

But what of the paper written with reasonable care, which the student will not, after one swift glance at the grade, toss into the waste basket, that grave of many hours of correctors' labor? The laborious and minute correction of a great number of papers is so commonly admitted to be injurious to the teacher that his position need hardly be discussed. But is it good for the student—if anything injurious to the teacher can be good for the taught? Overworked teachers of English are likely to fall back on a general feeling that it should be done, or be content with saying that the head of the department requires it. Yet it is true that the teacher who carefully revises, and in effect rewrites a student's paper, is doing the student harm rather than good, for he is flying in the face of the principles of all good teaching.

A cardinal truth of education, as even the derivation of the word tells us, is that the student's own powers are to be encouraged to grow to their full height. This truism means that the peculiar genius of each student must receive its proper consideration. As Milton notes in his *Commonplace Book*, "The nature of each pupil must be observed, and not twisted in a wrong direction, for God did not design all men for the same function, but each to his peculiar service." And Milton refers us to Dante's words in the eighth canto of the *Paradiso*:

Evermore nature, if it fortune find
Discordant to it, like each other seed
Out of its region, maketh evil thrift;
And if the world below would fix its mind
On the foundation which is laid by nature,
Pursuing that, 'twould have the people good.

But you unto religion wrench aside
Him who was born to gird him with the sword,
And make a king of him who is for sermons.

Now the teacher who habitually rewrites the students' papers is usually not laying his mind to the foundation laid by nature, and hence cannot hope to have his pupils good.

All honest writing—and no other sort is worth correcting—is the expression of the nature of the student. Not even the most sympathetic teacher can hope to make wholesale changes in the sentences of many students without pretty general substitution of his own personality for theirs. This is highly disastrous when done by a man who has gone stale by much reading of themes, and whose corrections have assumed a uniform character, like those interchangeable parts that fit any Ford car. In fact, half of the students in any class probably are by nature as good as their instructor, and some of them are superior to him. The teacher who forgets this may look upon himself as unfit for his business, because forgetful of its greatest privilege—that of aiding in the development of men with powers far greater than his own. A teacher who rewrites the paper of a pupil naturally better than himself runs the risk of injuring his pupil just in proportion as he ventures beyond periods and capitals and attempts to substitute his own colorless though correct expressions for the more lively yet perhaps crude and inarticulate words of the student. Or if the pedagogue sits secure in superiority, the risk is still there. He is striving to raise the students to a level in which they breathe not their native element, but alien air. In any case the teacher's personality is not that of his pupils, and cannot properly be imposed on them. For example, if the instructor is interested in style, he leads the pupils with some sense for it to an artificial adoption of his own style, and gives those who have no sense for it corrections unintelligible to them. The attempt of a pupil to write to please another man, rather than to say his own say, is not likely to be a happy one.

The malign influence of substituting the mind of the teacher for that of the pupil appears everywhere. In giving something of his favorite clearness to an ambiguous sentence, the instructor

has no security against giving it a meaning different from that toward which the student was striving. I remember a boy of more than usual ability who, before he entered college, had devised an improved method for carrying out certain processes of the nursery business in which his father was engaged. His method was thought by experts worthy of description in an agricultural paper. Being under no illusions about his own powers of composition, he came to me, his teacher of English, for assistance. I labored with him over his piece of writing, and finally thought I had finished. At a last glance something aroused my suspicions, and after questioning I learned that I had been on the point of sending the boy to the printer with his article saying quite the reverse of what he wished to say. And so it must be when anyone takes into his hands for drastic revision the writing of another. It is better for a student to be left to express his truths however haltingly than to have imposed on him a smoothly worded falsehood. Even when the teacher corrects what is, abstractly, bad and poor to what is better, is it better for the student? Isn't it the same process as that of the teacher I heard say to a puzzled student: "Don't say that, say this"? And down went the more elegant expression. Can we blame the pupil for preferring a sentence which he thinks has some meaning to an alien form of which he feels—though he may not dare say so—that it somehow doesn't mean what he means.

John Ruskin, in looking back on his education, said that when he entered college, his tutors should have addressed him as follows:

You will furnish us with a short essay every week, on which we will make such remarks as we think proper. We do not expect you to follow our advice, unless you see the justice of it. Every writer, however young, must form his own style by his own judgment.¹

If we accept Ruskin's belief, we can perhaps avoid the reproach that our pupils learned to write in spite of our neglect of their independence and personality.

Yet even if the fault of correcting blameless nature is avoided, the best-intentioned student is likely to be so overwhelmed by a general demolition of his work that he has no heart left to observe all the corrections. So some teachers have wisely said: "Let us

¹ *Life*, by E. T. Cook, p. 80.

correct a few things, that the student may really lay hold of them." Or they have required the student to rewrite the paper, incorporating the teacher's corrections. This serves a useful purpose in suggesting to the young writer that composition is not a matter to be taken lightly, and it may lead him to inquire the meaning of the corrections he transcribes. But in so far as the pupil is a copyist, the instructor had better give him for transcription something written, not by a teacher of composition, but by a practitioner of the art, who probably never studied it in school.

There is some reason to think that a student who had no supervision at all, but spent the same amount of energy in writing as did his brother whose papers were corrected with sinful conscientiousness would at the end of a term be equal to the other in the things that count most in writing. Much of the good derived from English composition comes from the doing and not from the being corrected. We all know that a student who is corrected, no matter how thoroughly, does not at once become a satisfactory writer. The process of improvement is a slow one, and goes on within the student's own mind. The teacher's power to bring about a change in the writing of students is limited by their minds, and only what springs from within them counts in making good writing. It is of no consequence that the revised copy of the theme the teacher corrected is better than the first copy. The important thing is that the student have gained power within himself to make a theme better than its predecessor. A teacher must ask not, How much more to my taste is this theme than the other? but, Does this theme more adequately express the student's own genius? If we see on the pages the marks of a growing man, we can afford to forgive many crudities. An instructor may test himself by asking if as the days go on there is more and more diversity among the papers of his students. If the pupils are developing their own natures, they are continually moving farther and farther from each other.

But though correction is sometimes of little value, or even positively injurious, it can also be helpful. Hence I shall offer an account of what seem to me good methods of dealing with themes. Our decision on what we shall do with papers depends, however,

so largely on their nature that my observations will cover a wider field than that of correction. I give the results of my experience in the hope that other teachers will be led to give theirs. Indeed one of our chief needs in the study of education is to know more of what is actually done, or not done, in various classrooms. We can learn from the methods of others, though teaching, like writing, must be the expression of the nature of the individual. Plenty of teachers agree in generalities, but what we need to know is their true principles, that is, their practice. No claim is made for originality in my conclusions; they represent only something of what I have learned in the course of teaching from one to four freshman classes annually for nine successive years at three widely separated universities.

Student readers of themes cannot be employed if instruction is to be of high quality. The best that can be said for the correction of papers by untrained persons who do not come into direct contact with the students is that it may offer some relief to overworked teachers, and thus indirectly benefit the students.

Freshman English cannot profitably consist of instruction in the forms of discourse, seriatim, with a textbook and a book of examples of the various forms. These collections of specimens, put together without regard for the subject matter of the selections, usually contain some interesting fragments, because no man can put together two hundred pages from standard authors without including some good things. Yet no student can model his own writing on what he finds in the typical book of illustrations of the forms of discourse, and ought not to do so. The forms, as served to Freshmen, are creations for the classroom, without justification in psychology or reality. Pedagogically, they do not offer Freshmen a natural approach to composition, and practically no man ever said: "Go to, I will write expository paragraphs." And as to the genuineness of the categories, a former colleague of mine, stirring among books of selections in his first year of Freshman teaching found the same selection in one book of scraps under the head of description, and in another under the head of exposition.

It is generally best that all the themes presented at once by a Freshman class should deal with the same material; otherwise they

cannot be advantageously dealt with in recitations, because the topics of the papers will not be familiar to the students. This material must be something valuable which the teacher understands and the students have studied. Hence for a teacher of English it is normally the literature the class is working on. But any subject well taught and seriously studied will do. A teacher of political science should expect his students to write on political science, and a teacher of English literature should stick to his trade. To practice anything else is to admit that the teacher has forgotten what Socrates in the *Phaedrus* said about truth and verbal composition. Let us away with the fallacy that expression is something apart from matter. The number of students who cannot write well on literature is smaller than report makes it.

Without attempting to say anything of the benefits of the careful study of literature—which I hope most teachers of English are still willing to consider—I should like to mention a few of the advantages of literary works, and especially of poems, as subjects for the compositions of students.

An essay, poem, or group of poems is of small and definite compass, so that he who is to write on it has before him all his basic material, and can give it close examination. This is not true of many subjects which may be assigned; they are likely to require so much labor for an adequate knowledge of them that they are beyond the writer's powers, and he falls into the habit of composing without observation of his matter. But he can select one thing about a poem, observe it carefully, write on it, and be adequately checked up for false statements by his fellows and his teacher.

Literature has something of interest to almost every student. There are few who will not be interested in a number of the poems on a judiciously selected list. The subjects and states of feeling in even a single author are so various that satisfaction can be found for almost every taste. In the works of Tennyson, for example, which are excellently adapted to Freshman classes, there are biographies, simple stories, accounts of lowly life, bits from the classics, poems on history, science, and philosophy. The worst we are likely to get from any student who studies at all is: "I didn't

like the other poems, but this one I do." And his paper probably shows his liking.

And since literature is so various, it has more points of contact with life than anything else we can ask students to write on. If teachers of composition wish topics of the day, plenty of them are suggested in literature. Who are the great writers who have not been concerned with social and political liberty, and all that it involves of education, patriotism, and unselfish devotion to high ideals? And just so far as poetry is in contact with life, it is in contact with the experience of the student; hence every one has an opportunity to use the fruits of his own observation. A poem evokes his experience of men, landscapes, animals, and what not as nothing else can. Thus subjects taken from literature enable the young writer to consult his own interests, and yet the work of the class may possess that continuity without which there can be no effective teaching.

As for the student's language, though the Freshman is not to be expected to model his writing directly after "In Memoriam" or "The Idea of a University," he can gain an instinct for good English from writers of prose and poetry of established fame. Shelley tells us:

A person familiar with nature, and with the most celebrated productions of the human mind, can scarcely err in following the instinct, with respect to selection of language, produced by that familiarity.¹

And we read in Trevelyan's *Life of John Bright*:

His perfect familiarity with the Bible and Milton had not a little to do with the high standard of language which he set before himself from the first. "If my manner of speaking is good," he wrote when an old man, "it may have become so from reading what is good." And again: "It is a good thing to use few words and the best words, which are those which are simple and forcible, with no needless use of adjectives, too many of which spoil speaking and writing. To assist in attaining to a practice like this, the reading of good books—I mean well-written books—is helpful, so that the eye and the ear and the mind may become familiar with good language."

This reading of good books is a fundamental cure for the illiteracy of our students. The course in freshman rhetoric—without plenty of reading—is an attempt to make bricks of straw only. The

¹ Preface to *The Revolt of Islam*.

teacher of English composition cannot afford to abandon himself to the elementary task of correcting spelling and reassembling split infinitives which his less thoughtful colleagues would assign to him. Nether should he wholly avoid it. But if he wishes to fight illiteracy with effect, he must not be a scapegoat for the sins of teachers who will not actively concern themselves with the speech and writing of their students—as though thinking that history and biology were not spoken of in English. The teacher of Freshman English must deserve his right to stand on the same level as any other teacher of Freshmen, and must deal with big things, ideas and books that hit the intelligence of the students. This does more to improve slovenly sentences, than does constant worrying of details. The mint, anise, and cummin must be tithed, but the teacher of Freshmen who gives himself to trivial things and neglects the weightier matters of good literature does not make his course a power for literacy.

Literature may be used as material for composition not merely by bringing it into touch with the student's own experience, but by encouraging him to treat his subject freely. His papers need not be attempts of literary criticism. If the poem suggests something he has seen or heard of, let this give variety to his theme. So long as his paper has some relation to the poem or essay, let no more be demanded. On the contrary, encourage boys and girls to write in their own ways on the books they study. This is a liberty that makes for the strength of the individual, and that stimulates the other members of the class.

For the sake of the latter result, let the students read their papers before the class. All should have a chance, but most opportunity should be given to those who show themselves most deserving of it. This reading of the papers in class has the obvious value of training the student to present matter in public, and of giving opportunity for suggestions on pronunciation, but that is not all.

It gives the writer an audience; his paper is not merely something for a teacher to correct in private, as he would an examination paper, but something to present before his fellows, which they will be able to appreciate, for they also have prepared papers on

the same material. The teacher should emphasize the audience as much as possible, as by asking various members of the class whether the paper just read was interesting or instructive, and why or why not. This leads each student to attempt something of which his classmates will approve.

The general and detailed criticism of each paper by the class and the teacher should be utilized as much as possible to develop in the students the faculty Balzac had, of looking on his own writing as though it were the work of another. Each should be encouraged to see his own vices and virtues, both magnified and diminished, in the work of his classmates, and the teacher in his remarks should speak for the benefit of the entire class as well as for that of the individual whose paper is under discussion. The knowledge that certain good or bad portions of a paper are typical gives the class a sense of unity, and of communal effort toward improvement.

From criticism of the papers in class comes also a healthy emulation. Every student of spirit wishes his own work to appear well, and will labor to sustain his place in the eyes of the class. Thus the standard of the whole class is raised, for even the lazy man is not content to have his work continually suffer by comparison with that of his fellows. The intellect of the dull man is quickened by contact with those of his neighbors, and not infrequently he comes to do more than had been expected of him.

The teacher should leave the comment on the papers as much as possible to the students, yet should not hesitate to speak plainly, and above all to encourage merit by praising what deserves praise. It is better to point out the right road than to warn against the wrong one.

Next in value after the classroom as a place in which to deal with a student's composition comes the personal conference; here work can be done which is hardly possible in the recitation. The conference, though a very valuable method of teaching, is also very costly, and can be much used only when teachers are many and students few. In this, however, it is like every other educational device, as we hope America will soon learn. The personal conference should be used with caution, for if the teacher is over-

burdened, and comes to it in a perfunctory way, he accomplishes little. A few living conferences are better than many dead ones.

The method which the writer has up to the present—after much experiment—found most effective, is as follows. Half a dozen students are asked to come at the beginning of an hour. The teacher seats himself by each in turn, and goes quickly through his paper, saying nothing, but checking words, phrases, sentences, or paragraphs to which he wishes to direct the pupil's attention. He has it understood that a mark does not mean a mistake, but merely something which the student is to consider. If a glance at a paper shows that it is seriously deficient in spelling, or punctuation, the instructor does not then read it, but asking the student at once to endeavor to correct it, turns to another pupil. When a paper has been read and marked by the teacher, he gives it over to its writer, with a word of praise if praise is deserved, and with a suggestion or question as to some such thing as the truth of an assertion, the arrangement of matter, or the failure to illustrate a general statement. The student immediately goes to work, trying to see why certain words or sentences have been checked. In this process he makes free use of the dictionary, several copies of which are ready in the conference room. He also has at hand a copy of the literary work on which his paper is based. After the half dozen papers have been rapidly gone through, the teacher is ready for the second part of the process, which is the supervision of laboratory work. The students remain seated and the teacher goes among them, talking with those who desire his help. So long as a student is busy, the teacher lets him alone. Sometimes at the end of half an hour a student will have corrected his mistakes and worked out an improved plan on the basis of the teacher's initial suggestions. Others have less independence, and speak with the teacher several times at intervals. Aid is not forced on students; on the contrary, everything is done, or left undone, to encourage them to work for themselves, finding their own errors and making all possible improvements. The teacher especially avoids definite correction or rewriting of the papers, discussing them, perhaps suggesting various alternatives, but leaving the student free to work the matter out as best he can. When the pupil has done what he can with his sentences, revised a paragraph, or devised an improved plan, then

the teacher may make further suggestions. Finally there comes a time, in the middle of the hour for some students, at its end for others, when the conference cannot be of much more profit for an individual. This is a variable matter; sometimes the conference is very brief. In one instance the instructor may read the paper, and ask the writer to think about the last paragraph. After ten minutes the student says he sees how to improve it, and after a little discussion is allowed to go, with the understanding that he is to rewrite the paragraph. In another instance the student may labor over his paper word by word, even into the next hour. The average student spends most of the hour, and leaves after having looked up his misspelled words in the dictionary, corrected his gross errors, made a rough draft of a revised version of part of his paper, and perhaps modified his plan. The teacher attempts to impress on him that what has been done in conference does not exhaust the possibilities of improvement—that for example the revision of one sentence illustrates principles the pupil is to apply to other sentences when he rewrites his paper in his own room.

In this laboratory work the teacher makes every effort to adjust himself to the individual student, considering that his duty is not to correct papers, but to bring the student to correct and improve them for himself. Hence much will be done to encourage the excellent student in the way of progress, and at the same time it will be remembered that the slight improvement in a halting theme that results from a student's own efforts is better than all the polishing of the most zealous teacher. The instructor is gadfly rather than dictator.

This method teaches the student to labor at his writing, and shows him that improvement comes from his labor. Thus he gains a sense of understanding and power as a foundation for future effort. If English I can develop in young men and women this sense of potency, and provide nourishment for their thews in the study of life as revealed in English literature, it has done its work. We cannot ask more of a university course than that it furnish solid, useful, and noble material, that it aid the student to take that material into his own experience, and that it encourage him to labor with his own hand and brain in making the result pleasing and edifying to others.